

MRS JEHORAM'S BREADTH OF VIEW.

XXXI

"I heard some one playing the fiddle in the Vicarage, as I came by," said Mrs Jehoram, taking her cup of tea from Mrs Mendham.

"The Vicar plays," said Mrs Mendham. "I have spoken to George about it, but it's no good. I do not think a Vicar should be allowed to do such things. It's so foreign. But there, he"

"I know, dear," said Mrs Jehoram. "But I heard the Vicar once at the schoolroom. I don't think this was the Vicar. It was quite clever, some of it, quite smart, you know. And new. I was telling dear Lady Hammergallow this morning. I fancy--"

"The lunatic! Very likely. These half-witted people.... My dear, I don't think I shall ever forget that dreadful encounter. Yesterday."

"Nor I."

"My poor girls! They are too shocked to say a word about it. I was telling dear Lady Ham----"

"Quite proper of them. It was dreadful, dear. For them."

"And now, dear, I want you to tell me frankly--Do you really believe that creature was a man?"

"You should have heard the violin."

"I still more than half suspect, Jessie ----" Mrs Mendham leant forward as if to whisper.

Mrs Jehoram helped herself to cake. "I'm sure no woman could play the violin quite like I heard it played this morning."

"Of course, if you say so that settles the matter," said Mrs Mendham. Mrs Jehoram was the autocratic authority in Siddermorton upon all questions of art, music and belles-lettres. Her late husband had been a minor poet. Then Mrs Mendham added a judicial "Still--"

"Do you know," said Mrs Jehoram, "I'm half inclined to believe the dear Vicar's story."

"How good of you, Jessie," said Mrs Mendham.

"But really, I don't think he could have had any one in the Vicarage before that afternoon. I feel sure we should have heard of it. I don't see how a strange cat could come within four miles of Siddermorton without the report coming round to us. The people here gossip so...."

"I always distrust the Vicar," said Mrs Mendham. "I know him."

"Yes. But the story is plausible. If this Mr Angel were someone very clever and eccentric--"

"He would have to be very eccentric to dress as he did. There are degrees and limits, dear."

"But kilts," said Mrs Jehoram.

"Are all very well in the Highlands...."

Mrs Jehoram's eyes had rested upon a black speck creeping slowly across a patch of yellowish-green up the hill.

"There he goes," said Mrs Jehoram, rising, "across the cornfield. I'm sure that's him. I can see the hump. Unless it's a man with a sack. Bless me, Minnie! here's an opera glass. How convenient for peeping at the Vicarage!... Yes, it's the man. He is a man. With such a sweet face."

Very unselfishly she allowed her hostess to share the opera glass. For a minute there was a rustling silence.

"His dress," said Mrs Mendham, "is quite respectable now."

"Quite," said Mrs Jehoram.

Pause.

"He looks cross!"

"And his coat is dusty."

"He walks steadily enough," said Mrs Mendham, "or one might think....
This hot weather...."

Another pause.

"You see, dear," said Mrs Jehoram, putting down the lorgnette. "What I was going to say was, that possibly he might be a genius in disguise."

"If you can call next door to nothing a disguise."

"No doubt it was eccentric. But I've seen children in little blouses, not at all unlike him. So many clever people are peculiar in their dress and manners. A genius may steal a horse where a bank-clerk may not look over the hedge. Very possibly he's quite well known and laughing at our Arcadian simplicity. And really it wasn't so improper as some of these New Women bicycling costumes. I saw one in one of the Illustrated Papers only a few days ago--the New Budget I think--quite tights, you

know, dear. No--I cling to the genius theory. Especially after the playing. I'm sure the creature is original. Perhaps very amusing. In fact, I intend to ask the Vicar to introduce me."

"My dear!" cried Mrs Mendham.

"I'm resolute," said Mrs Jehoram.

"I'm afraid you're rash," said Mrs Mendham. "Geniuses and people of that kind are all very well in London. But here--at the Vicarage."

"We are going to educate the folks. I love originality. At any rate I mean to see him."

"Take care you don't see too much of him," said Mrs Mendham. "I've heard the fashion is quite changing. I understand that some of the very best people have decided that genius is not to be encouraged any more. These recent scandals...."

"Only in literature, I can assure you, dear. In music...."

"Nothing you can say, my dear," said Mrs Mendham, going off at a tangent, "will convince me that that person's costume was not extremely suggestive and improper."